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4:Downs I-5 (no date) 1961 MT30 Washo MT30

WASHO RELIGION

BY

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INTRODUCTION

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the withering rationalism of civilization the religion of the Washo has simply altered and expanded to serve the Washo in new situations.

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In this work I take the broadest possible definition of religion, conceiving it as any institutionalized activity or attitude which reflects the Washo view of the cosmos. In so doing I have included a number of categories which may not generally be considered suitable for inclusion under the heading of religion. Stewart, for instance, includes shamanism, curing, special powers of shamans, miscellaneous shamanistic information, guardian spirits, destiny of the soul, ghosts or soul, and jimsonweed. My own work includes some of these specifically, incorporates some under other headings, and treats a number of subjects not included in the list given above.

The reason for this approach is practical rather than theoretical or philosophical. As anthropological definitions of religions are extremely varied and the activities described as religious under various definitions cover a greater or narrower range, it seems valuable to include as many activities as possible in a purely descriptive work.

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The goal of this paper is to make as much information as possible about the religious and ritual activities of the Washo available to scholars who may be interested in religion. The inclusion of as many fields of activity as possible permits them to select information which they feel pertinent to their interests.

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Wherever possible I have tried to include direct quotations from informants as well as information about their behavior and attitudes, so that my own interpretations and conclusions can be examined by others in light of the information on which they are based.

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Statements made by informants are indicated by quotation marks. I did not have a recording device available and did not attempt to record entire interviews verbatim. However, whenever informants indicated that they considered their statements important I took them down word for word. If I felt some passing remark to have significance, I asked the informant to repeat it and often read it back to him for verification. Other stories, particularly those of a mythological nature, or semilegends, or experiences which were important to individual informants, were repeated voluntarily on almost every occasion of our meeting. Whenever statements are presented in quotation marks the material was gathered in this manner.

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This paper contains material from a number of sources. Statements of fact or interpretations taken from published anthropological or historic works are indicated by citations in the customary manner. Information based on conversations or other private communications with other investigators is so designated. All statements of fact which are not credited to these two sources are taken from my own field notes and represent statements of my informants.

8: Merriam& d'Azevedo E-4, 5 (1954-1955) 1957
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Though some say that this reveals disrespect for "the medicine," rival Peyotists do boast of their prowess by comparing the number of "buttons" they were able to eat during a single night.

The concept of disease also appears to stem from traditional beliefs. Thus it is said that the roadchief, like the earlier shamans, can "look into a person and see what is wrong with him—just like X-ray" (see also Siskin 1941:105). With the aid of Peyote he can track down the disease and remove it with prayers. Disease-objects are often vomited out during meetings and are described as having the form of snakes, insects, stones, etc. The roadchief treats the afflicted part of a sick member by fanning it with smoke or by "switching" it with eagle feathers. Leaders conduct small curing sessions for individual Peyotists and non-Peyotists for a subtly defined fee. There is a tendency to "try" various leading Peyotists during a serious illness, calling on them in rotation to conduct meetings "until the right song or prayer makes a connection."

Other changes also suggest the increased integration of the sect into its Washo setting. English is no longer used in prayers or for the conduct of ritual. If a non-Washo is present, important sections of the proceedings are translated for him by one of the roadchief's assistants. Christian elements have diminished considerably; the Bible is no longer a part of the leader's paraphernalia, and biblical references in prayer or conversation are rare.

II

The ethnological data and tape recordings upon which this paper is based were collected by Warren d'Azevedo over a period of nine months among the Washo Peyotists in 1954 and 1955. Alan P. Merriam made the musical analysis and is responsible for the major portion of the final organization and writing of the paper. Recordings were made in the summer of 1954 on a portable Magnecorder loaned by Radio Station KPFA of Berkeley, California.

The musical sample consists of five song cycles sung by three Washo members of "The Tipi Way" sect described above. One of the singers was the founder and original roadchief of the sect, and all three have been active participants in the religion since the early years of its introduction by Ben Lancaster. Their songs are therefore fully representative of the type and style current among Washo Peyotists. All five cycles were recorded at a single session in the cabin of a leading sect member in Woodfords, California. The occasion was an "open prayer meeting"—one of the informal social gatherings of Peyotists and their non-Peyotist friends for the purpose of singing practice and religious discussion.

To "The Tipi Way" Peyotists, singing is a measure of prestige and spiritual eminence. The most admired singers are the most influential Peyotists, and the degree to which a Peyotist has found "the Way" through the "medicine" is demonstrated by his competence with song, drum, and rattle. It is of equal importance to knowledge of the intricate ritual procedure of meetings, and excellence at both are requirements of leadership. A large repertoire of songs is

8: Merriam& d'Azevedo E-4, 5 (1954-1955) 1957
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than sheepish about it. The mistake was ritualistic rather than musical alone, and from this standpoint it seemed to make a great deal of difference; it was clearly a mistake and it was commented upon by others as indicating a lack of attention, or flippancy, or worse, depending upon what the listener felt about the singer.

It is at least possible that the singer's mistake in this case was brought about by nervousness. The person involved had been the victim of a faulty tape recorder—the tape was blank after his first rendition of songs, and this threw him into a state of terrified depression which was only partially relieved when the songs came out perfectly on second try. Other evidences of nervousness appeared in jocular or serious remarks addressed to or about the machine —a mistake was made "maybe because I was lazy or worried about that tape recorder."

Any errors made were exploited by rival musicians. In the case noted above, the singer's chief rival remarked: "Maybe that machine don't want your songs; maybe the medicine won't let those songs get taken down." In the cases of two leading singers who drummed for each other, both remarked semi-privately that it had been difficult to sing because of the poor drumming—"X was hitting all over the place. It threw me off and I made a lot of mistakes"; "Y had his thumb wrong; the sound was too open"; "I had a hard time keeping up with him; he was getting ahead of me all the time." Such rivalry is sometimes verbalized directly—"maybe he was trying to mess up my singing" —and in general it seems to be one of the means by which hostility is expressed among Peyotists. It is expected that one person expresses his feelings about another by the way he either "helps" or "holds him back" in singing.

Values

There are some values in respect to Washo Peyote music which may be directly listed; they are those most frequently and clearly verbalized.

1. The most important thing about a song is that it is like a prayer. It has a unity and power of its own which cannot be "broke into parts."
2. Songs are gifts of Peyote and should be taken for what they are, rather than being talked about and analyzed.
3. Singing a song at the wrong time, or talking about it, may spoil it so that it loses its power.
4. Certain songs are to be admired for their intricacy, and the singer who can learn them is also admired.

On a somewhat different plane are other values, which are expressed as:

1. There is a certain length of time a song should be sung to feel right; it has to build up a certain amount of emotion and concentration in the singer and the listener.
2. "He drags the song out a little too long, like he don't want to let go of it. You can waste a song that way."
3. "He liked that song, I guess. He sang it good and he feels good. You can tell that.

Blood pressure determinations were
126 made by the senior author at least three times during each interview, at five
141 minute intervals. Heights and weights were also determined. Interviews
124 were conducted in the homes of respondents.

124 It was hoped at the outset that each adult member of the three Washo
114 communities of Dresslerville, Woodfords and Carson City would be included in the survey. However, the pressures of time limited the series to 100 persons, representing approximately 50% of the adult population of these three communities. All but two or three of the Washo contacted agreed to participate in the study. Nonetheless, the possibility that the interviewed group was biased in some manner, such as being more geographically accessible and therefore socially "different" from non-contacts, suggests that results be interpreted with caution.

147 For the analysis that follows, a diastolic blood pressure, taken during
128 the initial interview, of 90 mm. Hg. or more was defined as an indication of hypertension. Tests of significance used in the analysis are based on Chi squares or T-tests. Findings significant at or beyond the 10% level of confidence are reported.

Results

147 The mean blood pressure levels of the Washo studied are set out in
158 Table I by age and sex. It will be noted that in this sample blood pressure increases with age, that the males have higher pressures in the younger ages and the females higher pressures in the older ages. Further, Washo blood pressures are high in terms of the criterion traditionally used as an indication of hypertension -- a reading of 90 mm. Hg. or more for the diastolic -- as indicated by the fact that the mean pressures, particularly of the older groups, are either very close to, or above, the upper limits of "normal."